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Advances in Diachronic Construction Grammar – debating theoretical tenets and open questions

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Workshop Description and Research Questions

During the last decade, the constructionist approach has definitely been the fastest growing linguistic and interdisciplinary cognitive-functional approach to language (cf. Goldberg 2013: 30). This is confirmed by

- a) a large body of recent publications (cf. e.g. Tomasello 2003; Croft & Cruse 2004; Fried & Östman 2004; Fischer & Stefanowitsch 2006; Butler & Arista 2009; Coleman & De Clerck 2011; Hoffmann & Trousdale 2011, 2013; Hilpert 2014; Boogaart et al. 2014; Ziem & Lasch 2014)
- b) the development of several versions of Construction Grammar (e.g. Cognitive Construction Grammar (Goldberg 1995, 2006), Radical Construction Grammar (Croft 2001), Sign-based Construction Grammar (Michaelis 2011, Boas & Sag 2012), Fluid Construction Grammar (Steels 2011), Embodied Construction Grammar (Bergen & Chang 2013), Usage-based Construction Grammar (Diessel 2015).
- c) an increase in scope and the emergence of new research directions (e.g. constructional morphology, application to languages other than English, typological comparative studies, computational modeling etc.) and
- d) the growing number of international conferences and workshops being held.

Since Israel's seminal paper (1996), many historical linguists also "see an excellent fit between the mechanisms of syntactic change and the basic principles of Construction Grammar" (Barðdal & Gildea 2015: 9). Construction grammar is considered a useful descriptive tool for diachronic analysis because its architecture invites us to think "about change in form and meaning equally, as well as the creation of and changes to links between constructions in a network" (Traugott & Trousdale 2013: 231). Especially a usage-based, cognitive constructional approach lends itself very well to modeling morpho-syntactic change (e.g. grammaticalization) as it understands change as a gradual, incremental bottom-up process and stresses the importance of frequency effects, analogical reasoning, chunking, and entrenchment. Grammar is an emergent phenomenon and change happens through use.

Attracted by those premises, many researchers have started to eclectically reframe their argumentation in constructional terms, while others try to develop a comprehensive framework of diachronic construction grammar (Bergs & Diewald 2008; Fried 2009; Brems 2011; Patten 2011; De Smet 2013; Hilpert 2013; Traugott & Trousdale 2013; Trousdale & Norde 2013; Trousdale 2014; van de Velde 2014; Barðdal, Smirnova, Sommerer & Gildea 2015; Perek 2015; Sommerer 2015; Smirnova 2015; van Rompaey, Davidse & Petré 2015; Heine, Narrog & Long 2016, Traugott forthc.)

As DCxG is still a very young endeavor, many theoretical questions have only been touched upon inconsistently so far. One of these fundamental questions is whether diachronic construction grammar can be a fruitful endeavor without placing cognition and psychological reality/plausibility at the center of discussion (cf. Hilpert forthc.)? On the one hand, DCxG's aim has been defined as the "historical study of constructions" (Barðdal & Gildea 2015: back cover) looking for their occurrence "in specific types of usage events" (Fried 2015: 140) with a rather descriptive focus on which constructions exist, when they arise/compete, and how they formally or semantically change over time. On the other hand, DCxG with a cognitive outlook focuses on psychological underpinnings and aims to "make statements about the [internal] linguistic knowledge of earlier generations of speakers" (Hilpert forthc.). Note that these two goals are not equivalent.

Next to this question, many model-internal concepts have not been discussed explicitly enough or are simply understood differently by different researchers. Additionally, one can observe a lack of consistent terminology and annotation. However, we believe that only by hands on application, the strengths and weaknesses of a constructionalist model can be made visible for our field.

This workshop offers a platform to discuss the theoretical foundations of diachronic construction grammar by suggestions and refinements on open questions. Skimming through the current literature, we have identified unresolved questions in 3 different (intimately related) areas (i-iii) which we believe are particularly relevant as answering them in one way or the other will have significant repercussions for a diachronic model.

i) Nodes & Networks: Constructions are organized in constructional networks. “Constructions come in taxonomic and meronymic networks of constructional families” (Barðdal & Gildea 2015: 23). Lower level constructions inherit features from higher level constructions vertically. Additionally, horizontal links between constructions on the same level of abstraction enrich any inheritance model (van de Velde 2014, Traugott to appear).

- (1) When is it feasible to postulate a separate node in the network?
- (2) Which options exist to capture vertical & horizontal relations between constructions within a network?
- (3) Should sketches of constructional families be based on form, on function or on both?
- (4) Which inheritance model should be favoured?
- (5) What is the theoretical status of constructs and allostructions especially in a diachronic perspective?

ii) Constructional change vs. Constructionalization: A distinction has been made between constructionalization and constructional changes (see Traugott & Trousdale 2013, Smirnova 2015).

- (6) The question remains whether it is necessary/possible to postulate such a difference after all. Are there alternatives to differentiating between types of change (node changes vs. connectivity changes (cf. Hilpert: forthc.))?
- (7) What is the role of analogization, frequency effects and reanalysis?
- (8) How can phenomena like constructional competition and changes in constructional productivity be implemented within a network model?
- (9) With respect to diachronic data and to changes within and between constructions, how relevant is the issue of (non-) compositionality, and chunking?
- (10) Related to that is the question of polysemy, mismatch and coercion effects, which is particularly important in diachronic studies, especially if one thinks about analogy and neo-analysis as the major mechanisms of constructional change.

iii) Notation & Formalism: Current studies use a variety of notational styles and often do not adhere to any constructionist formalism at all. Still, that does not mean that DCxG should not at least aim to develop a ‘useful’ notational formalism (compare the Leipzig Glossing Rules).

- (11) Can DCxG do without any notational formalism?
- (12) If not, how should/could a (language-specific) annotation look like? How much formalism should we aim for in diachronic work?

We hope that a discussion of those questions will contribute to develop DCxG further and spark off many constructional diachronic case studies in the future by clarifying theoretical aspects thereby making it more applicable.

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